EVALUATING THE OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY FORESTS IN NEPAL USING CASE STUDIES

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Introduction:

Community forestry emerged in different places between 1970 and 1990 (starting in Asia, and later in Africa and Latin America), as a response to forest degradation and overexploitation of forest resources. Concern over environment and human wellbeing in the 1970s, has led to efforts in protecting the environment and helping local people in various ways. One of the strategies to simultaneously deal with problems of forest degradation was community based forest system, commonly knows as "community forestry" (Charnley & Poe, 2007). Though the definition and terms of community-based forest are different in different places, they all share three similar characteristics: 1. There is some kind of devolution of power from the state to the local people, 2. Ecologically sustainable management of forests is the goal, where local communities take responsibility of protection and improving forest health and 3. Local communities can gain economic and social benefits from the forests.

Community Forests in Nepal are important for environmental vitality and supporting local livelihood. Since the transfer of management to Panchayat system in late 1970s (Acharya, 2002), and recognition of Community Forest User Groups in 1987, community forests in Nepal has shown significant positive results in regards to forest conservation and environmental protection. However, the second objective of community forestry (improving livelihood and local development) has not been achieved due to marginalization of poorest households and socio-economic inequality in the communities. Some communities have been able to channel resources to create projects for poverty alleviation, while in most others poverty alleviation has not been the priority. The marginalized groups are not benefiting from community forests despite the theoretical predictions, thus challenging the potential to equitable governance through participatory management and devolution of power.

As a student of Public Policy focusing on natural resource management, I am interested in the different facets of community forestry and keen on evaluating the different reasons for success or failure of community forest as a natural resource management strategy. I have been researching about community forestry for a few years, and thanks to SRA award, I was able to go back to Nepal and extend my research. I would also like to thank Mr. Deepak Dorje Tamang of SEARCH-Nepal for all his support and guidance. I'm also deeply indebted to my advisor, Prof. Brent S Steel (Oregon State University), who has been a constant guide, mentor and support throughout my graduate program.

Community Forestry in Nepal:

Community Forestry in Nepal began in the 70s, with the sole objective to protect the forests. The government was unable to police and protect forests, so small forest areas were handed over to the communities for management (Government of Nepal, 2013). Later, local development was included as an objective of CFs. Since the concept of Community Forests (CFs) emerged in the 1980s, new instruments and tools to manage forests in Nepal have been evolved, modified and re-modified. The present CFs are guided by Forest Act 1993 and Forestry Regulations 1995, which have recognized the Community Forest User Groups (CFUG) as the autonomous, independent institution that are responsible to protect and manage the forest land with defined boundaries and user groups. Currently there are about 17 thousand CFUGs in Nepal and are supported by district forest offices, NGOs, civil society and local government.

So far, there have been mixed results about the effectiveness of community forests in Nepal, showing both positive (Gibson, Williams and Ostrom 2005; Pagdee et, al 2006; Agrawal and Chattre, 2006; Berkes, 2007; Bray et. al 2008) and negative results (Chakraborty 2001; Kumar, 2005; Blaike, 2006; Brown and Lassoie, 2010). Community Forests in Nepal has shown significant positive results, but its second goal of local development has shown mixed results. In fact, since the transfer of management, poorer households have become worse off as they are burdened with the responsibility of management, while they obtain minimal benefits. Inclusiveness is largely missing, where women and lower-caste are excluded from decision-making processes even though they do most of the day-to-day management work (Agrawal, 2001).

Observations and lessons learnt from Community Forestry case studies:

Successful Community Forests making difference in society:

In the cases of successful community forestry, there have been tremendous changes in the society.

Political change: Community forestry has helped in devolution of power, mainly by creating a room for local politics. Local leaders are heavily involved in community forestry, and coordinating with other stakeholders and government, have been able to present local needs and demands on a national level.

Environmental change: In the cases of successful community forests in Nepal, there have been large effects on the forest conditions. The forests that were heavily deforested and suffered from soil erosion are becoming greener, and locals have been able to guard and protect their forests from further deforestation.

Reaching out to poorer households: In the cases where community forests have been successful, some of them have been able to reach out to poorest of the households and support them. One of the CF I researched had built 19 permanent shelters for the poorest households, there were some poverty alleviation programs that were implemented to support the poor.

Social changes: Not to a large extent, but community forestry has brought disadvantaged people in the forefront of discussion and decision-making. Though it is not implemented as much, and still needs rigorous regulation mechanism, women and other disadvantaged people are being included in the discourse.

Redistribution of Power and Benefits within communities:

Advocates of empowerment have been working on educating women and lower-caste communities, but it is only half of an attempt. Government has to ensure that the formation of CFUG committee is based on gender and caste inclusiveness. Recently, the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation passed a law that mandates that CFUG committees to have at least 50% women members. A lot of CFUGs in Nepal have not followed this rule, often with an excuse that women do not participate. In some cases, where women do make 50% of the CFUG committee all the top decision-making positions (chairman, VC, secretary, treasurer) are taken up by men.

The second goal of community forests is local development (first is environmental protection), but much has been focused on building infrastructure for local community. Research has shown that about 25-30 percent of the income generation is channelized for supporting local health facility, local schools, drinking water etc. These are important aspects of development but usually the poorest households benefit more from private consumption rather than public services. Some CFUGs have created and implemented poverty alleviation programs where they identify the poorest households and support them through training programs for income generation, support to build houses, scholarship for children etc. Currently less than 10% of income from community forests goes to support the poor households; this percentage needs to be increased by proper identification of the economically disadvantaged.

Identifying the impacts of policies that affect the situation of forests in Nepal:

During my research, I realized that there were two major policies that have affected the situation of forests in Nepal: immigration from hills to Terai (that affected the forest situation in the plains and displaced the natives), and development projects in the hills that increased the demand for wood for construction. The locals rely on the forest for subsistence, but as per my research, it was the large-scale construction and demand for timber that deteriorated the forest conditions rather than local use. The new regulations mandated by the government (like making women participation in decision making role) are a positive step towards inclusiveness, and we need more of such policies that will accommodate for equity and inclusiveness in community forestry in Nepal.

Pictures from the field:

Participation in Community Forest General Assembly

Women bringing fuel wood from Community Forests

Case of failed Community Forest- erosion and flooding of the river

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